

The Top Ten Reasons Why Every Church Planting Team Needs a Worship-Arts Leader

By Dave Hall

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What do we mean when we say, "worship?" It is important, not only for the purposes of this article, but also for our own spiritual health and well being, that we understand clearly what we mean when we use the word "worship." Many evangelical Christians today have a very truncated understanding of biblical worship. When asked to define the word, they respond by saying, "It's singing," or "It's praising God." Worship, from a biblical perspective, is far more than merely singing or praising God in the assembly of the saints (as right and wonderful as that is). For years now I have been a student of the word "worship" and have begun to collect definitions of the word. One of the best I have found was penned by Dr. Bruce Leafblad. I have expanded it slightly and include it here in hopes that it will provide a framework for our understanding:

Worship is both a life to be lived and an event in which to participate. It is "the submission of all our nature to God. It is the quickening of conscience by His holiness; the nourishment of mind with His truth; the purifying of imagination by His beauty; the opening of the heart to His love; the surrender of will to His purpose - and all this gathered up in adoration..." (1) In and through worship, believers, by grace, center their lives (heart, soul, mind and strength) on the Lord, humbly glorifying God in response to His attributes, His acts, and His Word.

One might also ask, "What is a worship-arts leader?" A worship-arts leader is one who is uniquely gifted and called and trained to lead the people of God into the presence of God. I incorporate the word "arts" into the role because I believe that both historically and biblically, all the arts played a major role in corporate worship. They should, therefore, continue to play a major role, especially in the cross-cultural church planting context. As missionaries and missions organizations dedicated to the task of establishing church planting movements, it is critical that our strategies and practices be built on firm biblical foundations. Much work remains to be done to understand more fully the implications of the biblical theme of worship in regards to our theology and missiology. Toward that end, I humbly submit to you the top ten reasons why every church planting team needs a worship-arts leader.

Every church planting team needs a worship-arts leader because . . .

#10. . . Every church should be a worshipping church.

Worshiping God is the believer's highest calling. It is, as Dr. William Taylor has so aptly said, "The mother of all paradigms." Worship expresses the reason for our redemption. In the Exodus account, we are told why God went to all that trouble to free His people from bondage. "Let my people go . . . so that they may worship me," (Exodus 9:1 italics added). Worship will either be central to the planning and process of church planting or it will be peripheral. It will be one way or the other. We can't have it both ways.

#9. . .Worshipping churches worship in the heart language of the people.

What is worship in a people's "heart language?" It is culturally-relevant worship that is intelligible to the people. It incorporates their music, their arts, their means of expressing truth in their culture. Yes, great care must be taken to avoid the dangers of syncretism. Contextualizing worship practices requires sound biblical and anthropological observation and application. Let us not allow, however, the learning curve in these matters to keep us from applying the biblical principle found in I Corinthians 14:23-25. That principle simply stated is this: intelligible worship is much more apt to produce the response of repentance, bowing down and crying out, "God is truly among you!" than is unintelligible worship.

#8 . . .Worshipping in a people's heart language requires worship leadership.

You don't have to be in ministry for very long to realize the crucial role of well-trained, godly leadership. Facilitating the release of people from diverse cultures into worship in spirit and truth is both an art and a science. I call it "ethnodoxology" (the study of how and why people of diverse cultures glorify the true and living God). To do it well requires a well trained, gifted worship-arts leader. I place the emphasis here on training as opposed to gifting because there are many church planting teams without someone "gifted" to take the lead in these matters. Ethnodoxology is, however, something that can be taught, caught and implemented by those who have a heart for worship, but feel they are not particularly musically or artistically endowed.

#7 . . . Worship leadership increases the effectiveness of both the church plant and the church planter.

We know from experience that shortly after a church is planted in North America, one of the greatest areas of need is for gifted, trained, worship leadership. We spend large amounts of time and energy to fill this vital leadership role. We do this, I trust, because we believe that biblical, creative, culturally relevant worship is essential to the effectiveness of the church in glorifying God both with our lives and our witness. The church planted in a cross- cultural setting has just as much need, but much fewer resources for meeting it. Let us pray that God will enable us to be pro-active in mobilizing and empowering worship-arts leadership for every team both before it is sent and after it is on the field.

Not only do we need worship leaders for the effectiveness of the churches we're planting, but we need them for the sake of the team as well. John Piper, in his excellent book, "Let The Nations Be Glad", writes, "Missionaries will never call out, 'Let the nations be glad!', who cannot say from the heart, "I rejoice in the Lord . . .I will be glad and exult in Thee" . . . Missions begins and ends in worship." Missionaries without this foundational understanding are living out too much of their missionary experience in a spiritual desert. One of the worship-arts leader's key roles is to facilitate and model both corporate and lifestyle worship with humility and servanthood, as a part of the team.

#6 . . .We are worshipers first, missionaries second.

We need a fundamental paradigm shift to occur in our understanding and practice of missions. Jesus said that God is seeking worshipers; not people who know a lot about worship, not people who know how to worship, but worshipers. Being a worshiper is not something you do, it is something you are. Contrary to North American evangelical public opinion, God did not make us human doings, He made us human beings! In God's divine economy, it is "worshiper first, mom second; worshiper first, husband second; worshiper first, missionary second."

#5 . . . Missionaries who are fired up about God will be more effective witnesses for His glory.

John Piper, in "Let the Nations Be Glad," challenges our paradigm for ministry when he writes, "Missions exists because worship doesn't. . . . You can't commend what you don't cherish." Our evangelism and discipleship of the nations must flow out of our passion for God and His glory, or it will be shallow at best, or man-centered and self-glorifying at worst.

#4 . . .Culturally relevant musical and artistic worship is a powerful evangelistic tool inside and outside the church.

When unbelievers come into corporate worship that is in their heart language, they are much more open to hearing the truth of God's word. Numerous case studies show that their stereotypes of Jesus being the foreign God of a foreign religion, etc. are removed simply by relating the gospel and facilitating worship in culturally relevant forms. Showing interest in their music and arts validates them as a people and opens great opportunities for building relationships and sharing the gospel. Cassette tapes and visual art forms that use scripture and scriptural

themes in culturally sensitive ways have found great favor even among Muslim groups adamantly opposed to the gospel.

#3 . . .The performing arts provide unique opportunities for evangelism.

A man working in Pakistan was taught the principle: "You can say anything to a Muslim in poetry or music and he will listen; say the same thing in prose and he may kill you." He decided to put the principle to the test by hosting an international music festival. A hall was rented and many groups played, including a national Christian music group which presented the gospel using indigenous Pakistani music and instruments. After the standing ovation at the conclusion, the mayor of the city announced, " This has been the finest musical event in the history of our town and I feel it should be repeated every year!"

#2 . . . The performing arts provide unique opportunities for creative access.

One of PIONEERS' missionaries learned to sing in the style of the people they are attempting to reach with the gospel. This opened up opportunity to record. She is now nationally known and has many opportunities to sensitively share her faith. This national notoriety gives her negotiating power (what the Chinese call "Gwanchi") when it comes time to renew visas. In addition, studying the music and arts of a people is another excellent means of entry into closed countries and provides practical benefit to developing indigenous forms of worship.

#1 . . .The battle against the enemy is won in worship.

"Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the LORD and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying: "Give thanks to the LORD, for his love endures forever. As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir . . ." (II Chr. 20:21-22). There is something inherently combative about worship; namely, the enemy hates it. Worship is warfare, pure and simple. In our battle to see the unreached reached, to see worshipers brought to Christ from every tribe, tongue, people and language, we would do well to not neglect one of our most powerful weapons . . . worship!